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**“At least with cheating there is an attempt at monogamy:”**

**Cheating and Monogamism among Undergraduate, Heterosexual Men**

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## Abstract

In this qualitative research, I first use hegemony theory to describe the cultural forces that position monogamy as the only privileged form of committed sexual relationship coupling available to undergraduate heterosexual men. I then interview forty heterosexual male students for their experience with monogamy and cheating, finding that the hegemonic mechanisms of subordination and stratification that stigmatize nonmonogamy consequently result in an absence of consideration of the problems associated with monogamy. I use cognitive dissonance theory to explain participants' desires for simultaneously wanting monogamy and nonmonogamy, calling this dissonance 'the monogamy gap.' Data suggest that participants who cheat do so not because of lost love, but instead cheating represents an attempt to rectify conflicting desires for monogamy and recreational sex.

Key Words: Cheating, Men, Monogamy, Monogamism, Monogamy Gap

Recent decades have brought an erosion of orthodox views and institutional control of sexual behaviors and relationships in North American and Western European cultures (Joyner & Laumann, 2001). This is made evident in the growing percentage of people who engage in pre-marital intercourse (Laumann, et. al., 1994; Johnson, et al., 2001), the social and legal permission for divorce (Jackson & Scott, 2003), the markedly expanded social and political landscape for gays and lesbians (Anderson, 2009; Loftus, 2001), and what some would suggest is a lessening of the traditional double standard for heterosexual intercourse, permitting women to have casual sex with less social stigma (Tanenbaum, 1999; Wolf, 1997). In addition, for university students, there also exists a culture where many students avoid romantic relationships; instead, undergraduates frequently engage in casual sex, something they call hooking up (Boogle, 2008; Stepp, 2007).

Although these changes may mean that students now have sex before dating, these social-sexual changes do not seem to have affected how heterosexual undergraduates value monogamy once they establish sexually romantic dyadic relationships. Thus, despite increasing political activism and a burgeoning body of queer and feminist sociological research into nonmonogamies (Kleese, 2005, 2006; Myers et al., 1999; Yip, 1997); and despite anthropological literature which highlights a variety of polygamous marriage practices and culturally acceptable nonmonogamous behaviors for romantic relationships across many cultures (Alexander, 1980; Sanderson, 2001), when it comes to British undergraduates who engage in coupled relationships, there seems to be slow cultural progress toward the acceptance of any model other than monogamy. In British culture, there remains but one socially positive sexual script for heterosexual couples, and it is a decidedly pro-dyadic form of sexual monogamy (Willey, 2006).

This article reports the results of 40 interviews with university-attending men concerning their relationship to monogamy. I am interested in the multiple factors in the relational and cultural context that influence how these young men view monogamy, open-relationships, and cheating; why they cheat and how they rectify their cheating in relation with their esteem for monogamy. I analyze the results through two complimentary theoretical lenses. I first utilize hegemony theory, calling monogamy's privileged social position *monogamism*. I then show that, as part of the operation of hegemony, a cultural reverence for monogamy prevents critical scrutiny concerning the *costs* inherent in monogamy (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). I suggest that there exists a cultural unwillingness to adequately examine the price that monogamism has on the sexual and emotional health of (ostensibly) monogamous couples, and I show that despite monogamy's hegemonic cultural dominance, multiple forms of nonmonogamies nonetheless exist as the covert norm for many of my participants.

Instead of attributing their nonmonogamous practices to moral failings however, I use cognitive dissonance theory to suggest that cheating occurs because of the unreasonable social expectations of monogamy; particularly concerning emotional desires that conflict with strong somatic desires. Thus, in this article, monogamy is scrutinized for negatively affecting the quality and duration of coupled relationships.

### *Cheating among Male Undergraduates*

I am not interested in and do not report upon a categorical typology of cheating behaviors. I am instead concerned with why men value monogamy and why they are led to cheat, whatever those cheating behaviors might be. Accordingly, rather than engage in a lengthy discussion of what cheating means, I simply define it as *any* physical sexual behavior that would be met with disapproval by one's partner—even if it is just kissing. Thus, some of the men (all

unmarried) in this study have cheated only through kissing other women while others have engaged in petting, oral, or vaginal intercourse. I recognize that there is much difference between kissing and intercourse, but again, it is not my intention to draw meaningful statistics from this selected sample. Instead, I am interested in *why* informants cheat. Moreover, I use the term cheating instead of infidelity in order to differentiate between married and unmarried partners.

Any form of extradyadic sexual interaction with anyone other than one's ostensibly monogamous partner (in all its sexual variants) remains highly stigmatized in North American and Western European cultures (Treas & Giesen, 2000). However, this does not mean that people adhere to this powerful social script (cultural level narrative). For example, the quantitative work of Laumann, et. al. (2004) suggests that 25 percent of married men report having at least one extra-marital 'affair,' while Kinsey et. al. (1953, p. 437) found about half of all married men and a quarter of all married women have 'committed adultery.' Smith's (1991) quantitative investigation found 70 percent of married men have adulterous sexual relationships; and other quantitative research suggests between 1.5 and 3.6 percent of people have cheated on their married-partners within the previous year (Smith, 1991; Choi, Catania & Dolcini, 1994; Leigh, Temple & Trocki, 1993).

In respect to university undergraduate heterosexual men specifically, Wiederman and Hurd (1999) find that 68% have cheated by kissing and 49% by intercourse. Significantly, once men had cheated, eight out of ten do so again. Feldman and Cauffman (1999) also find that one third of their male participants have cheated, although it is not clear how participant's understood cheating. Furthermore, it is important to consider that just because one has not cheated; it does not mean that one would not if the opportunity arose (Greeley, 1991). These findings therefore

suggest that despite being culturally stigmatized, cheating may be closer to the rule than the exception for undergraduate males (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999).

### *Categorizing Monogamy Types*

I define monogamy loosely as an overt and/or implicit expectation that a couple is socially expected to reserve all sexual interaction (including sexual kissing) to one another. However, I understand that this social value is the outcome of a complex number of cultural, materialistic, historical and political influences (Alexander, 1980). Some of these include religious doctrine, fraternal egalitarianism, wage labor, and feminism. But exploring the history of monogamy, or why monogamy is culturally valued, is *not* the focus of this particular research (Barash and Lipton, 2001). Instead, I examine how my participants relate to this contemporary expectation, regardless of how it emerged. This therefore is not research about why we socially value monogamy; it is research about how my participants deal with this cultural value.

Rather than being a unitary construct, there exist multiple categories of monogamies. This is because the term monogamy refers to a highly contestable, individualized and socially malleable set of attitudes and behaviors (Kanazawa & Still, 1999; Remez, 2000). These meanings are currently embedded within a number of other social institutions, including religion (Willey, 2006), politics (Foucault, 1990) and the nuclear or 'standard' family (Smith, 1993). Thus, in order to work with the variety of monogamies that my participants discuss, I define four categories: physical, desirous, social and emotional.

First, *physical monogamy* is the easiest to categorize because it reflects participant's bodily behaviors, or how many extradyadic sexual experiences the participant has had. Still, some men consider kissing a violation of monogamy; others do not. Furthermore, some men do not consider oral or anal sex to be violating their understanding of monogamy as much as vaginal

intercourse. Similarly, others consider cyber or webcam sex to be cheating while others do not. This makes even this most basic label of physical monogamy a slippery definitional category. I therefore rely on categorizing cheating according to this model by asking informants if their partners' view such behaviors as an act of cheating.

Second, *desirous monogamy* reflects participants' somatic desires, or how many sexual partners they *fantasize* about having (or would desire to have if there were no social controls on their monogamous relationships). Third, *social monogamy* reflects participants' desires to be thought of as monogamous by their peers and society more broadly—even if they are not practicing it. I include anyone in this category who sticks to the monogamous label, even if their behaviors do not align to it. For example, Coleman (1988) suggests that even those in open-relationships normally adhere to the social definition of monogamy. This increases social capital and helps couples avoid stigma. I argue that social monogamy is also reflected where it is divulged that either or both in the dyad have cheated, nonetheless the couple remain together.

*Emotional monogamy* reflects that of dyadic romance only. Thus, having sex with a stranger would not violate this type of monogamy, but having an emotional affair would. This category is the most complex for discussing monogamy because it includes a variety of types of affairs (work, friendship, on-line, and so forth) and because it might also potentially include polyamory, as well as considering definitional problems associated with the difference between friendship and a sexual and/or romantic relationship (Nardi, 1999).

### *Hegemony Theory*

There are a number of useful theoretical models that I might have used for analyzing this data. I might have chose to use Douglas's (2002) notion of purity or danger; Durkheim's (1976) notion of sacred or profane; but there are several reasons why I find Antonio Gramsci's (1971)



theory of hegemony the most useful in explaining the stigma of cheating. First, hegemony theory belongs to a class of theories (conflict theories) that are designed to examine social inequalities. Conflict theories mainly stem from Marxist thinking, and they seek to examine how dominance is obtained and sustained. Conflict theorists view society as a system of social structures and relationships, which are ultimately shaped by economic forces and social power. In this case, I examine the social dominance of monogamy as a social system guiding the creation and perpetuation of romantic relationships. I find hegemony theory the most useful because hegemony is a particular type of hierarchical dominance in which a ruling class, or in this case a cultural belief, is not only legitimated, but also naturalized in order to secure acceptance and support from those subordinated by it.

While a common feature to hegemony is that a threat of force often exists to assure compliance (such as legislation), a key notion of hegemony (and another reason I found hegemony theory so useful here) is that force cannot be the *causative* factor in eliciting complicity. Instead, hegemony necessitates that those influenced by the dominant idea or desire be affiliated with it through their own choice, or at least through a sense of their own socialized and/or ‘naturalized’ desires. This is why I suggest that there exists an important definitional distinction between compulsory monogamy (where laws prohibit extramarital sex) and what I call *monogamism* (a culture in which individuals volitionally aspire to monogamy). Similarly, I borrow from Barash and Lipton (2001) to describe men who enact their agency to stigmatize those who are not monogamous (thereby reproducing monogamy’s dominance), and those who subscribe to the unexamined assumption that monogamy is both right and natural (thereby reifying and naturalizing monogamy), as *monogamists*.

However, hegemony's power is never total. Any form of domination is also subject to change produced through contestation of that dominance. If monogamy's hegemonic dominance was total, there would be no cheating. Thus, while monogamy might be the ultimate ideal toward which participants aspire, male undergraduates may also be influenced by strong social scripts that utilize hooking up as a mechanism to build heteromascuine capital among their peers. This variation might help explain why participants express cognitive dissonance in their relationships.

### *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

Although hegemony theory is the overriding theoretical framework, cognitive dissonance theory also proves useful because most participants express two simultaneous but competing and contrasting attitudes toward monogamy—simultaneously wanting and not wanting it. Cognitive dissonance theory is a proven heuristic tool for analyzing the contrast between two or more incompatible cognitions—and the behavioral implications of this inconsistency (Aronson, 1969; Bem, 1967; Festinger, 1957).

Traditional cognitive dissonance studies inflict (normally under lab conditions) a gap between two disparate wants or beliefs. I do not conduct such a positivist test because the data indicated that cognitive dissonance *already exists* with participants. Dissonance emerges from their socially constructed emotional and/or intellectual desire for monogamy and the somatic (biological) and/or socially constructed desire for recreational sex. Cognitive dissonance theory is appropriate in this context because it has frequently been invoked to explain how people deal with the tension caused by such variance (Bem, 1965; Burris, et. al. 1997).

Accordingly, I use cognitive dissonance theory to examine the conflict between the somatic desire participants express for recreational sex (Alexander, 1980) as juxtaposed to their emotional (and I posit socialized) desire for monogamy. I call the difference between these

somatic and social desires *the monogamy gap* and I suggest that, like in other studies employing cognitive dissonance theory, participant's competing and contrasting desires produce sexual and emotional tension that ultimately lead most participants to find catharsis through cheating (Park, 1929).

There is likely strong disagreement that the desire for multiple sexual partners is biologically driven or socially constructed. However, whether the origin of the monogamy gap is constructivist or sociobiological is inconsequential for understanding my use of cognitive dissonance theory, because it is the outcome, not the antecedents, of the variance between men's contrasting desires that I examine.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The purpose of this research is to explore the multiple relational and cultural factors that influence how these young men view monogamy, open-relationships, and cheating; why they cheat, and how they rectify their cheating with their esteem for monogamy. I recognize that monogamism has significant intersectional properties to race, class, age, gender, religion and sexuality, and that these intersections may combine to further subordinate those who do not follow the social expectations of monogamy (Tanenbaum, 1999; Willey, 2006). However, I do not address these intersections with this research.

Instead, my participants are strategically selected to represent men that might otherwise be described as maintaining hegemonic positions relative to other socially stratified categories. Accordingly, I limit the participants to those who are white, heterosexual, and do not adhere strongly to a religious doctrine. By limiting the sample in this way, I am better able to focus on broad theoretical understandings of how monogamy acts as hegemonic oppression, because I

delimit these other forms of stratification (e.g., race, class, age, gender, religion and sexuality ) as causative factors.

The 40 men, between 18 and 21 years of age, all attended a large Southeastern university in England, and all are British citizens. They come from diverse regions throughout England. They were recruited from two different academic classes. The final factor for qualifying for an interview was that each participant must have been, or currently be in, a heterosexual relationship for three months or longer.

After limiting the potential sample by race, sexuality, relationship status and religion, there was an opportunity to interview a total of 40 men. Thirty men were interviewed during the second half of the 2007-2008 academic year and remaining men were interviewed the following summer.

I do not intend to suggest that my sample reflects all university-aged men. Nor do I make generalizations about the intersection of race and class with cheating. Finally, it would be a mistake to read too much into this research concerning men's rates of cheating. However, the discussion of why these men cheat, and the distress this cheating creates is theoretically illuminating.

### *Procedures*

I informed the participants at the opening of each interview that I was not looking to judge cheating behaviors. Instead, I told them that I was interested in why men cheat. To further set the participants at ease and encourage disclosure and reciprocation, following Kong et. al's (2002) and Wenger's (2002) recommendation, I disclosed sensitive information about myself. Accordingly, in my opening script I disclosed my history with dating, cheating, and my sexually

open-relationship with my husband. I believe that this had the desired effect of influencing further disclosure from the participants and it also raised questions for discussion.

Interviews were designed to foster a non-judgmental exchange between researcher and participant (Johnson, 2002). Most conversations ran between 60 and 90 minutes (the shortest was just 30 minutes). The order in which topics were discussed; the exact wording of questions, and, the amount of time allotted to each question varied depending upon the flow of each conversation.

Questions centered on exploring the various heterosexual relationships that participants maintained, how long they dated, and (if the relationship had ended) why they broke up. Participants were next asked to describe their understanding of, and feelings toward, monogamy. The interviews' opening script allowed me to determine which participants were not aware of the nature of open-relationships. They were then asked to describe how they felt about open-relationships. Discussion then centered on whether and/or how they had ever cheated on their partners (e.g., "in the whole six months that you dated her, how many times did you cheat on her by kissing another woman?") A follow up question asked, "You don't have to tell me exactly what you did, but how many times did you cheat on her in other ways?" Participants were generally willing to discuss these issues, and I asked them to elaborate on the circumstances surrounding their cheating episodes as they were comfortable.

Questions also focused on how they felt about their cheating, whether they informed their girlfriends of it, whether their girlfriends discovered the cheating in other ways, and how they perceive cheating affected their relationship quality. They were also asked to describe how they felt (emotionally) toward their partners (both before and after cheating), through stories or examples.

## *Measures*

I used a constant-comparative method of open and axial coding of my notes, until I was satisfied that my coding accounted for informants' social scripts in a logical, consistent and systematic manner. A portion of these codes and themes were then cross-checked with another researcher for inter-rater reliability. Still, the interpretive nature of this research certainly leaves open the possibility of alternative meanings such that other researchers may come to differing conclusions regarding the data (Ponterotto, 2005). Finally, all appropriate ethical measures have been taken, including insuring participant anonymity.

A limitation of my methods is that I did not tape-record the conversations. This restricts the textual analysis that can be performed on the data. However, I feared that the presence of a tape recorder might increase participants' likelihood of strategically managing their monogamous identities through having a record of their transgressions (Spradley, 1970). Thus, I took copious handwritten notes during interviews (which occurred in my office) and I typed up my notes *immediately* after the conclusion of each interview. Although I recognize the limitations of not having precise transcripts, I maintain that my notes still permit me to capture relevant stories and accurately depict attitudes and events.

## **Results**

The desire to be thought monogamous is of paramount importance for these participants. Collectively, these men are adamant that they value monogamy—that they support it as the ideal personal and cultural relationship model. For example, Adrian describes monogamy as “the ideal,” and Mark describes it as the “Only natural way to love someone.” Still, others infer allegiance to monogamy through ignorance of other relationship types, as many of the

participants had never heard of an open-relationship. As reflected in many interviews, after telling Ben what an open-relationship was, he said. “If you’re not doing monogamy, you’re not really in love then, are you.”

Despite this reverence for monogamy, however, there is considerable variation in how participants understand this term. For example, Ben maintains his identity as monogamous because the only woman he fantasizes about having sex with is his new girlfriend. Others fantasize about women other than their girlfriends, but like Tom, “know better” than to tell their girlfriends this. Joe discusses his attractions to other women *with* his girlfriend, while Matt engages in role-playing with his partner, pretending she is someone else during sex. Alex flirts with strippers before faithfully returning home to his girlfriend with heightened sexual energy. Others have kissed or received oral sex from other women without their partner’s permission. Several men in this study have engaged in extradyadic sexual intercourse—one over a dozen times. One of the couples has even had a threesome. Yet despite these varied extra-relational sexual desires and practices, all of these men consider themselves monogamous.

These varying social scripts highlight the diversity of systems governing ‘monogamous’ relationships. The participants unanimously identify as monogamous, even though their behaviors vary widely. Thus, it seems that, to these men, it is less important as to what they *do* sexually, and more important that they *identify* as monogamous. In other words, participants who fail to live up to monogamous expectations tend to go about pretending to their partners (and to others) that they are, in fact, monogamous.

From the perspective of hegemony theory, this finding suggests that participants recognize a strong cultural stigma for those who violate the monogamy script. This hegemonic hold is so complete that my participants craft their personal and social identities as monogamous,

even though many of them have extradyadic sex. However, further discussion with participants reveals some cracks in this monogamist thinking.

First, participants distinguish between monogamy types. For example, all participants readily agree that *physical monogamy* is more important to their relationship than *desirous monogamy*. For example, Ben says, “It’s okay to *want* to have sex with other women; it is just not okay to act on it.” Ant agrees, “I want other women, sure. Sometimes I *want* four or five of them in a night (laughs), but that doesn’t mean I have other women.” But participants also equate monogamy as the ‘natural’ outcome of supreme love—the ideal form of coupling—even though they *simultaneously* believe that their desire for recreational sex is biologically driven. Tom says, “Yeah, I want sex with other women. Of course. I’m male. But if I love my girlfriend enough I shouldn’t want it.” When I point out that he has earlier indicated that he wanted sex with other women because he *was* male, he reconsiders his statement. “I don’t know. That’s weird. I do want sex with other women, but I shouldn’t [want it].” Hence, Tom navigates two contrasting and heavily naturalized beliefs: (i) that the desire for monogamy results from true love and; (ii) that men naturally desire recreational sex even when in love.

Tom is not alone in this dissonance. Despite expressing reverence for monogamy, many participants make it clear that monogamy does not come naturally, or even with ease to them. This is likely to be particularly true of men in college, who experience a culture that valorizes hooking up for single men. Tony says that he struggles “all the time” with not cheating. “I get mad at her,” he says. “I want sex with other women, and I know she’d never let me, so sometimes I just feel like cheating because I’m not supposed to.” James, too, says that he desperately wants other women. “I can’t stop thinking about other women,” I’m sure I’ll cheat. I mean, I don’t want to. But I will.” Still James says that he’s not happy about this. “It sucks,



really it sucks. I don't want to cheat, but I really want sex [with someone other than his girlfriend]." Accordingly, most of the participants suggest that they live with the competing and contrasting social scripts of sexual desire for extradyadic sex and the emotional desire for monogamy. I call this *the monogamy gap*.

Interviews suggest that this gap does not normally appear at the relationship's onset (c.f. Ringer, 2001), which is generally characterized by heightened romance and elevated sexual passion (Harry, 1984). None of the participants cheated within three months of dating. Instead, cheating generally began after six or more months. Mike says, "No. I had no desire for sex with other women at first. All I could think about was her." But after these elevated levels of passion and romance decline (sometimes plummeting) matters begin to change. Dan says that although he has always fantasized about other women, he used to be content to have sex only with his girlfriend. Referring to his earlier sex life, he says, "It was hot...real hot. But in time, it just lost some of its appeal. We did things to spice it up, and we still have something of an active sex life, but I can't say that some other girl wouldn't be nice from time to time." Similarly, Jon says, "When I first started dating her I thought she was so hot I wouldn't want any other woman for the rest of my life, but that's just not the way it turned out to be."

The declining interest and frequency of monogamous sexual activity to which Dan, Jon and Mike refer is the norm for men partnered two years or more in this study. These men express that, in time, their emotional desire for monogamy no longer aligns with their somatic drive for recreational sex (Ringer, 2001). In other words, the longer they are partnered the more they desire recreational sex with others (Harry, 1984). While most participants coupled only a few months are generally satisfied with the quality and duration of the sex that comes with monogamy, after two years, participants generally express contradictory feelings, wanting but

not wanting recreational sex with others. This two year variable was so common that one might call it ‘a two year itch.’ This changing direction of their sexual desires (between two months and two years) highlights the myth that monogamous desire is a natural product of ‘true love.’

The cognitive dissonance created by the competing desires for monogamy and recreational sex is likely made particularly salient for men in college. In addition to their heightened sexual energies, these men also experience contradictory sexual social scripts: One that suggests they should prove their masculinity through adventurous pursuits of sexual conquest (Adam, 2006; Connell, 1992; Jackson & Scott, 2004) and another that romanticizes the progression of dating, love and monogamy (Rose, 1996). Furthermore, university-aged men exist in gender-integrated sex markets with women of high sexual capital, variables that may inflate the tension caused by the monogamy gap. For example, when I ask Jon if he thought it was harder to remain monogamous at the university compared to when he’s at home he says, “Yeah, it’s amazing [at the university]. It’s like being a kid in a candy store. There are hot girls everywhere. It would be easier to resist cheating if I were at an all-boy’s school or something.”

Cognitive dissonance theory compliments hegemony theory in analyzing these interview data. This is because, whereas cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people are likely to creatively and selectively seek information to reduce their cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Frey, 1986), hegemony theory maintains that the categories we choose for critical examination are always those of the subordinated (Anderson 2009; Gramsci, 1971). Thus, monogamism carries serious implications for these participants because those inclined to resolve the tension of the monogamy gap seek messages that highlight the utility of monogamy and problematize nonmonogamies, reifying, naturalizing, and shoring up monogamy’s dominance in the process (Robinson, 1996). This leads most participants to creatively,

shamefully and secretly rectify the tension of the monogamy gap – something motivated by shame and accomplished through cheating.

### *Cheating*

Data from this research elucidates that despite a reverence for monogamy; most of my participants do not follow their own monogamous ideals. Most express wanting monogamy socially and emotionally, while simultaneously expressing a desire for extradyadic sex. The desire for recreational sex, both compelling and enduring, eventually influenced 26 of the 40 participants to cheat. While some participants readily identified their actions as cheating (primarily those who told me they had vaginal sex), those who performed other forms of sex (including kissing, and in one case receiving oral sex from a man) normally identified their actions as, “sort of like cheating” or “not really cheating.”

All participants who admitted cheating express a lingering anxiety that their girlfriends (or others) will find out about their transgression. This unanticipated fear is particularly true for those who also fear that logistical factors could threaten to expose their secret. For example, Dan attended a party with his friend Ryan, where he met a woman from another university. The two made out in a vacant room, but not without Ryan’s noticing. Dan says:

I had insane fear the next day. You know, that she would find out I wasn’t where I said I was. But then I began to forget about it, you know like I didn’t think about it all the time.... Still, whenever my girlfriend was around me and Ryan together, I totally stressed that he would fuck up and say something about it.

Dan also says that his cheating generated a further, unintended consequence. Dan later felt himself wanting to detach from Ryan’s friendship, but felt he couldn’t for fear that Ryan might be more inclined to reveal his secret.

Cheating participants also fear social ramifications should friends or family learn of their cheating. Paul says:

The guilt sucks, but it's not like I killed someone or anything.... But try telling that to her friends (laughs). My friends [presumably male] might be more understanding of it, but her friends [presumably female] would be pressuring her to break up with me.

Paul's response indicates that how individuals evaluate (judge) cheating may be gendered (DeSteno & Bartlett, 2002), but more important, he highlights the cultural pressure that cheating victims have to end their relationships. The result is that women are socially compelled to break up with their cheating boyfriends even if they do not wish to. Breaking up serves as an identity protection mechanism from a monogamist culture.

In addition to the fear and anxiety these men express, each cheating participant also maintains a varying degree of guilt. Dan says that while he maintains no guilt when masturbating to thoughts of other women, after once having vaginal sex with another woman he felt tremendous and overriding guilt: Guilt which remains over a year later. "I can't forget about it," he says. Yet despite the guilt and fear of discovery, Dan has yet to tell his girlfriend—he is too afraid of the consequences. "If I tell her she will certainly break up with me."

Interestingly, despite his guilt, and because his cheating has not been discovered, Dan claims to feel little reason *not* to cheat again. "If she finds out about the first one, she's going to break up with me. So why not do it with her [the same girl] again?" This is consistent with other literature on cheating, which finds that once men (or women) do cheat, they are likely to continue cheating (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999).

These data suggests a pattern concerning cheating. After entering into a sexual relationship, participants initially feel satisfied with monogamy, maintaining a sexual fulfillment

that comes from early relationship bliss (Aune & Comstock, 1997). At this stage, most view those who cheat as immoral, and rarely consider that they might themselves one day cheat. I suggest that this heightened early romance validates the myth that monogamy is sexually fulfilling, making it easier for men to commit to it. However, the participants' sexual fulfillment is mostly short-lived, and eventually most participants desire recreational sex with other women—even if they still enjoy sex with their partners. Stuck between both wanting monogamy *and* the type of compelling stimulation that comes with recreational sex, the initial strategy most participants adopt for dealing with the monogamy gap comes through fantasizing about others, spicing up their sex lives, and through the use of pornography. But once habituation causes even these strategies to grow ineffective, cheating grows increasingly tempting.

Initial cheating episodes almost always occur under the influence of alcohol. Then, after cheating, most participants attribute their 'failings' as something that 'just happened'—as if they occurred in an alcohol-induced social vacuum. Subsequent conversation, however, usually reveal somewhat of an intent on cheating; they place themselves into situations in which their agency gives way to chance of sexual activity. In Jon's case, he knew that a particular woman was interested in him, so he volunteered to walk her back to her room after a party. In reflection he says, "I know it was a stupid situation to put myself into, but I was drunk." And when asked if he would have readily volunteered to walk someone home to their dorm that was not sexually attractive to him, he answers, "No. I think I would have stayed and had another drink."

While interviews suggest that most participants primarily cheat because of the sexual monotony that comes with long-term sexual exclusivity (Wellings et. al., 1994) combined with a high sex drive (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Treas & Giesen, 2000), other structural variables make cheating *more likely*. As others have shown, these include separate habitation from one's partner

(Paik, et. al. 2004) and gender-integrated living situations (Anderson, 2008). Other influences surface from participants' access to a direct sexual marketplace, like a university (Laumann et. al., 2004); and a cultural hyper-sexualizing of men's gendered masculine identities at this age (Klesse, 2006).

It is also important to consider that cheating is also influenced by a rational choice in weighing the opportunity-cost in staying with a partner, compared to expressing interest in exploring nonmonogamies with them. This *cheating as a rational choice* hypothesis in dealing with cognitive dissonance is supported by the fact that none of the informants maintain that they cheat or cheated in preparation to break up with, or because they no longer loved, their partners, although a few of the men (like Jon) felt that it was, "No great loss," after his girlfriend found out and broke up with him.

Still, Jon was an exception to the rule. Most of the men maintain that they love their girlfriends when/while cheating. Matt, for example, says that he cheated on his girlfriend of three years. When she found out, she broke up with him. Matt suggests that he desperately loved her, and when asked to explain to someone who doubted this how he could support such a statement, he answers. "She broke up with me two years ago, and I still, desperately, want her." Matt reveals how he still cries over her loss, and how he wants, more than anything, to be with her again. Thus, although participants did not numerically quantify their love, I argue that most participants' social scripts about how they feel/felt about their partners indicate that cheating does not (or at least does not always) represent a loss of love for their partners.

Finally, I point out that just because one makes a rational choice to cheat, this behavior is often made in a culture which influences them to cheat. All choices are made with influence, and in this case, there exists not only social influence, but chemical. Alcohol is almost always a

factor in cheating. Furthermore, just because one makes a rational choice does not mean that they are free of guilt and shame following their actions. Indeed, many of these men deeply regretted their choices, particularly when they lost a girlfriend that they loved.

### *Cheating out of Love*

Although some participants express more love for their partners than others, none of the twenty-six cheating informants maintain that their cheating results *from* a lack of love. Nor do these men say that they cheated as a way to look for a new girlfriend. Instead, they unanimously express that the reason they cheat comes from a compelling desire for extra-coupled recreational sex, despite their genuine romantic interest.

This finding might anger some readers. Hegemonic perspectives on cheating unconditionally maintain that if one loves their partner they would not cheat. The other side of this equation is that those who ‘were cheated on’ are expected to be so socially damaged that they are compelled to break up with their partners. However, this is far too simple an understanding of the relationship between men, sex and love—matters are much more complicated.

Mark says, “It’s not that I don’t love her. I totally love her. I just need sex with others. You know what I mean?” Joe says, “I feel that I love her, I mean I don’t want to be with anyone else [emotionally] but I guess my actions don’t line up with that.” He then emphasizes, “But really I do love her.” Dan says more defiantly, “Of course I love her. I was just horny.”

These social scripts suggest that these men do not cheat because they are romantically unsatisfied; instead they cheat because they are romantically satisfied but sexually unsatisfied. Thus, a subversive interpretation of monogamism is to suggest that these men cheat because they

*do* love their partners—they are simply too afraid to take the chance of losing them by expressing a desire for recreational sex with other women.

Supporting this, many participants suggest that they love their partners even more after cheating: Violating relationship terms brings reflection and evaluation as to how much their partners mean. Of course one can argue that these men could, or perhaps even should constrain themselves from cheating, but that does not change the circumstances of whether (or how much) they love their partners. For example, when Mark is asked if he has ever considered telling his girlfriend that he would like to have casual sex with other women, he says, “Are you kidding me? She’d dump me in an instant.” Joe sarcastically agrees, “Right, tell my girlfriend that I love her, but that I need sex with someone else. That would go down well.” And Mike adds, “You just can’t say that. There is no good way to say that.”

This is not to suggest that all men cheat because they love their partners, certainly *unloving* partners are also likely to cheat. Perhaps if I had specifically interviewed men who had broken up with their girlfriends, I might have uncovered other data. However this was not the case for *these* participants. Treas and Giesen (2000) as well as Paik, Laumann and Van Haitsma (2004) inadvertently support this ‘cheating out of love’ hypothesis, because they find that cheating is more likely to occur among men who have stronger somatic sexual interests (a higher libido). If cheating were solely a result of failed love (i.e., it was not about sexual desire), one’s libido would not be a significant variable in cheating rates. I therefore suggest that, for at least some men, cheating becomes a sensible and *rational* choice in weighing the odds of the opportunity-cost to have their growing desires for recreational sex met, while not jeopardizing their relationship status by honestly expressing this desire for extradyadic sex to their partners.



Further highlighting the utility of this framework (particularly for college students), they do not have long-standing investments in their relationships, and they are not legally or religiously bound to their partners. Cheating is also made easier for undergraduates because they exist within a rich sexual marketplace. Furthermore, none have children or are married. Thus, they are culturally, legally and financially free to break up with their girlfriends, should their love expire (Brown, 1991; Treas & Giesen, 2000).

Gagnon and Simon (1973) posit ‘sexual script theory’ as a useful tool for understanding how society constructs cheating as deviant. In this case, I suggest that the construction of monogamy as the only acceptable sexual script (monogamism) is so strong that the influence occurs at the cultural, interpersonal, and psychological levels. Monogamy’s hegemony is so powerful that my participants see no other viable alternatives. For example, when I discuss with Paul the potential for opening up his relationship (so that he could have extradyadic sex without cheating), he quickly answers that cheating was better than being in an open-relationship because; “at least with cheating there is an attempt at monogamy.”

I argue that these data calls for a more complex view of cheating than monogamism offers. The cultural ascriptions of character weakness and personality disorder that many attribute to those who cheat (Vaughan, 2003), largely fail to critique the structural power relations between social morality, natural (or naturalized) sexual desires, and sexual recreation (Haritaworn, et. al., 2006); something that comes with a more sociological approach to the construction of sexual and gendered identities and behaviors. Therefore, instead of describing participants who cheat as lacking character, love, or morality—social scripts that hold monogamy as a test of personal character and romantic fortitude (Smith, 1991)—these interviews suggests that cheating for these men emerges from a culture that offers no socially

acceptable alternatives to the sexual habituation and frustration that occurs with relatively long-term monogamy for young, virile men (Glass & Wright, 1985; Treas & Giesen, 2000). The dominant cultural, political, religious and media messages that contribute to a sex-negative and monogamist culture demonize all but a select few ‘charmed’ sexual practices and sexual identities (Califia, 2000; Rubin, 1984), so that the monogamous mantra of ‘cheating as the product of failed love or psychological disease’ constrains other possibilities from social or personal consideration.

In light of the near-total social control that monogamism has over the practice of those who choose to enter into romantic relationships in this culture, I suggest that cheating becomes the *sensible* answer to the monogamy gap. Cheating provides men with the best chance to have their desires for extradyadic sex met, while also maintaining their relationship status. Cheating permits them to manage their social identities in a way that honesty with their partners (or others) would not. Thus, covert cheating occurs for these men as a result of the infeasibility of monogamy to sustain a sexually charged and varied sexual relationship alongside the cost of monogamism. Not only do they risk hurting their partners and their relationships, but they simultaneously subject themselves to guilt, shame, anxiety and confusion—all for the manner in which they rectify their dissonance. Monogamists therefore go about living between the oppressive layers of sexual want and emotional contentment. Those espousing the value and righteousness of monogamy not only promote their own cognitive dissonance, but they contribute to the stigma of those who are capable of outthinking social oppression.

### Discussion

By using 40 semi-structured interviews with white, heterosexual, undergraduate men who had once maintained a girlfriend for three months or longer, I highlight the hegemonic

mechanisms associated with the cultural ideal of monogamy. I describe the process of subordination and stratification through the cultural stigmatization of nonmonogamies as an effect of monogamism. As with other forms of hegemonic oppression, my participants desire to be associated with the privileged paradigm (Rubin, 1984) and consequently extol the virtues of monogamy, even if they do not themselves adhere to its basic principles. And, as with other forms of hegemonic oppression, monogamism necessarily means that the institution of monogamy itself goes largely unexamined. Instead, all critical discourse regards the ‘immorality’ of nonmonogamies. So, even though I find monogamy fails as a social institution for these men, it nonetheless retains its privileged social position as the only acceptable form of romantic coupling. Here it comes into sharp contrast with sexual social scripts for single men that emphasize recreational sex with ‘hookups’ and/or ‘friends with benefits’ (Mongeau, Williams, Shaw, Knight, and Ramirez, 2009).

This research adds to the literature on monogamy, cheating and open-relationships by utilizing cognitive dissonance theory to explain *why* cheating occurs among certain undergraduate men. However, because the sample is limited to undergraduates, I explicitly note the limitations of this study: College is a time in which people are thought to be exploring different relationships and experiences. Moreover, the ‘long-term’ relationships that I speak of in this research are not that long. Nonetheless, these data are useful for theorizing about monogamy and monogamism in ways that are likely to apply to other populations.

I postulate that cheating is viewed as a temporary solution to the stress related to the gap between the competing and incompatible desires of wanting new, exciting, and thrilling sexual stimuli, while simultaneously being socially constructed to desire monogamy, all the while fearing telling one’s partner they desire otherwise (the monogamy gap). Supporting this thesis,

the longer men were coupled, the more likely they were to cheat. However, this might also reflect growing strength in the relationship, which could ward off termination if their partner discovered their cheating. Furthermore, cheating seems to be only a temporary solution to the monogamy gap, so cheating frequency often increases with relationship duration.

Under these social conditions, I suggest that cheating occurs as a result of weighing the opportunity for recreational sex against the cost of breaking-up (or other emotional hardship) if their cheating is discovered or divulged. Participants in this research suggest that they cheat because they want or need recreational sex, not because they desire an emotional affair. This desire is then helped by the availability of women to cheat with in a rich sexual marketplace. These men then place themselves into social situations where inebriation is blamed for allowing their sexual desires to override their emotional will-power. Thus, if they are caught, they have intoxication as an excuse for their behaviors. Still, many problems arise after cheating, including, stress, anxiety and guilt.

I maintain that, ironically, for most of these men, cheating suggests that they *love* their partners. Their cheating is a way to maintain their emotional monogamy, while having their physical desires met. It is the best way to rectify (even if temporarily) the monogamy gap, with as little risk to losing their partner as possible. If, after all, these men did not love their partners, they are socially, legally, and morally free to leave them. In short, given that heterosexual sex seems easy to obtain in today's university hook-up culture (Bogle, 2008); staying with partners is therefore likely to reflect legitimate emotional attachment. It is for these reasons that I suggest that cheating exists as a rational choice. It is based upon an opportunity/cost analysis to provide cheaters with the recreational sex they want with the monogamy (or at least the delusion of monogamy) that they are culturally compelled to maintain. Cheating is a safer strategy for

acquiring recreational sex than requesting permission from their partners, but it has an added advantage: Almost all of the men I talked with said that while they (in some capacity) desire the ability to have sex with other women, few were willing to permit their girlfriends to do the same. Cheating then results not only because they fear losing their partners (should they ask for extradyadic sex), but it remains a way for men to have their cake and eat it too. Men continue desire to restrict their partners' sexual lives, while justifying their own sexual transgressions. Accordingly, the old double standard still exists.

College age men may also cheat not just because they maintain strong somatic desire to have sex with other women, but because they are influenced by a strong hookup culture that valorizes recreational sex and builds masculine capital in men who obtain more of it. Some of their dissonance might therefore be cause between these competing social scripts. The result, again, is that cheating becomes the rational answer to rectify their dissonance.

The failure to critically analyze monogamy has certain, measurable costs for couples who identify as monogamous but are not. This is because when cheating is discovered or divulged to one's partner, it is described as leading to unnecessary grief, pain, and often breakup (Pittman, 1989; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Vaughn, 2003). Divorce exists among over half of all married couples today, and much of this results from cheating (McLanahan & Casper, 1995). But this research shows that cheating results from the cognitive dissonance of not having one's sexual needs (the need for sex with others) met, even when they maintain strong emotional attachment for their partners. In other words, some men cheat and they *do* love their partners. Whether this occurs as a result of growing dissonance or not, the point is that cheating and loving one's primary partner are not incompatible. Thus, this research has implications for examining

sexually-open relationships (or other forms of nonmonogamies) through a counter-hegemonic lens.

In doing so, one might find that open-relationships are more conducive to emotional stability than are monogamous relationships. This is because nonmonogamous forms of coupling can somewhat remove cheating as a source of relationships stress (Ahmed, 2004), while simultaneously challenging jealousy social scripts that may lead to relationship trouble and even violence against women (Barnett, et. al., 1995; Hansen, 1985; Robinson, 1997).

Supporting this, Buntin, Lechtman and Laumann (2004) use the *Chicago Health and Social Life Survey Design* to show that heterosexual men's rates of violence against their female partners is between 10 and 62 percent (depending on the part of the city they studied) and Paik, Laumann and Van Haitsma (2004, p. 233) suggest that sexual jealousy among young men plays an "important role in elevating the likelihood of intimate-partner violence among dating and cohabitating couples." Because monogamy embeds men within an ownership script in patriarchal cultures (Aune & Comstock, 1997; Barnett, et. al., 1995), it is worth considering that the structure of monogamy may be more likely to contribute to violence against women than the structure of open-relationships. Of course, for this to work, men would have to view their partner engaging in extradyadic sex the same way they view their own extradyadic sexual activities.

The operation of hegemony as applied to monogamy may also have health implications. Ostensibly, monogamy is the most reasonable form of sexual practice for preventing sexually transmitted infections, but it is important to recall that cheating was the norm among my participants. Therefore, an empirical question of importance (and one not fully addressed with this research) is 'what is the risk of infection when one is engaging in high-risk sex with one's 'monogamous' partner?' The literature on infection control suggests a strong relationship

between rule breaking and risky intercourse—almost as if once an individual breaks a self-imposed rule they permit themselves to break other rules as well (Cochran & Mays, 1987). For example, Bearmann and Brückner (2001) show that heterosexual youth who take virginity pledges are one-third less likely to use contraceptives when breaking their pledge than youths who did not take the pledge. Conversely, those who permissively partake in recreational sex are more likely to use protection than those who cheat (Hammer et. al., 1996). Furthermore, Hammer suggests that when monogamous couples have sex without condoms, they do so not because they expect this practice to be safer, but because they fear questioning their partner's trust and commitment by asking them to use condoms. If men who cheat are unlikely to use condoms it helps explain why Mayer et. al. (2000) found that 88 percent of women infected with HIV in South India are in monogamous heterosexual relationships.

This research therefore implies that while university-attending women might think they can trust their monogamous partners, sociologically speaking they cannot—and most likely should not (Adam, et. al, 2000; Mutchler, 2000). And, although I did not study women and their sexual relationships here, this edict likely works the other way, too (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Men thinking that condom-free sex with their ostensibly monogamous girlfriends is safe, may also be jeopardizing their health. Essentially, trust in monogamy may lead partners to unwittingly choose unsafe sex (Adam 2006; Sobo, 1995).

Finally, the mere suggestion that men may cheat *because* they love their partners may close off critical inquiry, even among some sexuality intellectuals. But it is important to remember that, consistent with research on men in other cultures (Ho, 2006), my participants do not publicly identify as nonmonogamous, even when they are cheating. This highlights the resiliency of monogamy's dominance over all other forms of relationship coupling (Leap &

Boellstorff, 2004), and also highlights the importance of understanding the different types of monogamy discussed earlier. Accordingly, I suggest that the reality of monogamy has failed these men (and consequently their partners), but the illusion of monogamy persists. However, my cheating participants tragically fail to examine cheating and breakup in this light; instead, they fall upon their own swords of monogamous morality. They do so because monogamy remains as synonymous with ‘morality’ as heterosexuality is with ‘family values,’ even if both are built upon unexamined assumptions.

It should be noted that I am not politically concerned with making nonmonogamies gain cultural hegemony. However, this research indicates the need for the cultural recognition of varying relationship models without a presumption of the superiority or morality of monogamy (LeMoncheck, 1997). I desire multiple sexual social scripts and multiple models of relationships to co-exist as equally viable and moral. Yet, this possibility is currently nullified by the hegemonic control monogamy maintains. Hopefully this research will help with this pursuit.



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